Reading Fabrics of Choice:

A Study of Women's Redesign of Popular Media to Grow Voice and Social Identity

By Donna Mahar

Background for the Study

In this article, I share my explorations of concerns and actions related to social, professional, and personal images constructed by women with popular media. I invite readers to join me in recollections of my experiences as a teacher educator and findings as a researcher interested in understanding the choices my students and other women make to establish identities and voices in their respective cultures. We'll start with the words of two female students who helped me begin this journey.

During a class conversation on social identity, one of my students remarked that she did not use her first name, Raven, in an e-mail address in high school because people automatically thought she was Goth. Unable to present herself physically in electronic contexts, Raven didn't want to be misrepresented by what she felt her first name implied. This led another student to ask Jen if she was going to wear her pentacle earrings and oak wreath necklace when interviewing for secondary teaching positions. "One Druid I know didn't wear her jewelry until after she received tenure," Jen responded. "I'm going to wear mine from the start because it is part of who I am. I'm not going to bring this up in job interviews or in my classroom, but I'm not going to censor what my jewelry says about who I am. I don't think this would be a question if I chose to wear a cross or Star of David." These comments demonstrated these students' awareness of the power cultural perceptions have on how they are viewed and defined by those around them.

As a teacher educator, my participation in discussions with students like Raven and Jen became an impetus for my investigations of women's redesign of popular media such as clothing and jewelry and their reasons for choices made to express themselves and their social identities. Raven and Jen understood that how they were perceived and interpreted by others was influenced by physical presentation, whether a name used in a virtual space or a defining artifact worn in a real-time environment.

During the same semester when Raven and Jen identified limitations and miscommunications that can occur in the cultural contexts of on-line communications and public school environments, I visited an exhibit of kanga cloth in an adjacent classroom that fueled my interest in exploring women's redesign of popular media. Kanga cloth is printed with political symbols and slogans and worn by East African women to establish their voices in political and social issues for which they may have previously been silenced (Biersteker). The functionality of kanga cloth can be seen in wraps, veils, totes, and baby carriers. These brightly colored, machine-printed textiles feature repetitive designs and foreground a Swahili saying or proverb in the lower corner, allowing wearers to quietly express their positions on events and issues of importance in their cultures.

As suggested by Lewis and Del Valle, choices made by my students to represent or protect their identities in public forums and by women wearing kangas to comment on political issues illustrate that identity portrayed through artifacts and associations are "hybrid, metadiscursive, and special" (316). The variety of approaches to creating social identity in different cultural contexts that is revealed in statements made by Jen, Raven and women in kangas also corroborate Alvermann's premise that "all cultures, as

historically evolved ways of doing life, teach people about what is worth working for, how to succeed, and who will fall short" (13).

According to de Certeau, modern youth may behave much like women wearing kanga cloth to express social and political views in environments intent on silencing their voices. Conclusions drawn by de Certeau indicate that young people use clothing as a tactic of resistance to enact literacy messages and texts in spaces that traditionally have established filters for youths' engagement in and redesign of popular media. In addition, Raven's and Jen's deliberate selections of labels and artifacts for representing themselves support de Certeau's contention that young people in contemporary cultures carefully construct identities with acute awareness of and, in some cases, resistance to social expectations.

Working from what I learned from students, women who wear kanga cloth, and premises proposed by Alvermann, de Certeau, and Lewis and Del Valle, I conducted a 22-month study with 12 adolescents. The study was guided by the New London Group's multiliteracy theory, a perspective developed in the mid 1990s that views literacy and texts as fluid, multidimensional entities constantly undergoing redesign based on individual needs for full participation and accurate representation in their own culture (Jenkins et al.). Jenkins and colleagues posit that a participatory culture has "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (3). The concept of participatory culture allowed me to draw together what I had learned from students like Raven and Jen and the kanga prints of East African women as I initiated a formal study of how use youth employ

performance and presentation to embody the multimodalities posited by the New London Group.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The multiliteracy theory generated by the New London Group (NLG) addresses what this pedagogy of literacy learning and use means by elaborating on the importance of different aspects of Design. Cope and Kalantzis described tensions among the NLG's aspects of Design, which are created by available Design such as kanga cloth and pop-culture clothing and the act of Designing, which is how individuals interpret and utilize the available Design. Cope and Kalantzis explained that Design leads to the Redesigned or "the resources that are produced and transformed through the Designing" (23). Both the East African women's use of kanga cloth and Jen's use of media designs constitute the Design/Redesign process, a "re-presentation and recontextualisation" (22) of the original use and function of the cloth and clothing. The NLG's concept of gestural design allows a message to be conveyed without any violation of established social protocol. Elements that constitute gestural design include "behavior, bodily physicality, gesture, sensuality, feelings and affect, kinesics, and proxemics" (26).

Participants and School

The 12 youths followed over nearly a two-year period were identified during school visits and participant observations for a prior study. The research took place in a suburban middle school where more than 95% of the students were of European American decent. The community was mixed in socioeconomic status. The guidance counselor estimated that one sixth of the students were from professional households, one third from households where adults were employed in business and service industries,

one third from households where adults were employed in manual labor that was not always steady employment, and one sixth of the students lived in foster placement, or custodial placement with relatives.

*Research Methodology and Data Sources*

This 22-month qualitative study (Spradley) used a collective case study method (Stake) to highlight six of the 12 informants who shared affinity spaces based on similar fashion choices. In addition, one female student was interviewed more extensively than others to collect detailed data and provide examples that illustrate the findings from the larger group.

Data were collected through participant observations in and out of school where students' selections of attire were observed based on acceptance and resistance to participatory cultural groups with which they intersected. In focus groups conducted in school, students were asked about choices they made regarding fashion, specifically when these choices included logos, slogans, and messages. Out-of-school interviews occurred at participants' homes, local libraries, restaurants, and stores. Questions that were asked uniformly across these interviews included:

1) "What influenced your selection for how you are dressed in this environment?"

2) "Compared to how you presented yourself while in X, what influenced this change in

appearance?" (If a change occurred.)

3) "Where do you feel the most congruence between your dress and environment?"

Data was collected via e-mail, Facebook, My Space, and visits to sites visited by participants.

Coding and analysis of data was done continuously and recursively, and the following themes emerged: functionality, duplicity, regulation (such as selections made because of sports or orchestra), and Redesign. Data related to on-line representation such as with avatars and in descriptions, stood out in need of further explanation, which led to additional interviews with individuals and in focus grou  Analysis began inductively by examining transcripts, field notes, and artifacts. Taxonomies and other graphic representations (Spradley) were used to clarify and connect themes across the corpus of data. Follow-up questions were asked as data were coded to clarify meanings of responses and help ensure that aspects of youth culture, especially as related to popular media, were accurately represented.

Results

The students formed overlapping participatory cultural groups in which they began composing textual performances in collaborations with others who shared their affinity to resistance as identified by clothes, slogans, and self-designed fashion bricolage. Gee's notion of affinity spaces and Wenger's concept of community of practice helped me understand that the participatory cultures created within this academic space afforded the expression of social, political, and popular-culture messages that would not be allowed within traditional frameworks of written and oral discourse. This informal mentorship among youths raised a question about whether the messages they conveyed through fashion choices were intended or solely a by-product of wanting to be accepted within the affinity space.

Using the multiliteracy pedagogy and de Certeau's tactics of resistance as the lenses for analysis, I found that the data revealed that informants were making deliberate and conscious choices about how, when, where, and with whom they would engage in their personal literacies. Unlike the East African women who relied on the kanga to convey their political or social views, the youth in this study clearly articulated their rationales for the literacy choices they made. Their choices went beyond the pleasure aspect associated with texts of popular culture. They were able to clearly articulate choices they made in order to resist the school scripts they felt were in opposition to their views on class, gender, and ethnicity. Often the youth in the study used literacy events to disrupt established patterns of perception within the school. For females, this led to inconsistent fashion selections they hoped would be viewed as androgynous in an attempt to disrupt traditional expectations of how a successful girl student should dress. At other times gender and sexuality became much more fluid. When she did not feel the need to script a costume, one young woman's appearance was a mix of masculine and feminine. In interviews she very clearly stated the difference, as she saw it, between gender and sex. This ability to articulate the power and perceived autonomy garnered by fashion selections is something that eluded the women of East Africa.

Data from the case study of one female informant, Colleen, resonated with the on-line experience of my student Raven, who commented on her need to be in control of both on-line and real time social perceptions regarding her identity. Colleen's on-line signature follows. It sets the stage for her responses to popular culture, responses that were illustrated through her fashion selections as a mode of textual performance.

Colleen dePointe du Lac, the Anti-Britney, aka rocket queen high priestess of ozz, disposable teen, Taltos, sister of Ashlar mistress of axel rose & professional builder of mechanical animals hail to the almighty Ozz god! (They call me Mr. Tinkertrain, so come along and play my game, you will never be the same!)"you know where you are? You're in the jungle baby! You're gonna die…!

Her reference to "de Pointe du Lac" refers to her voracious readings of Anne Rice books and subsequent research on vampires and serial killers. "Taltos, sister of Ashlar" is again a reference to print sources of mythological Amazon like females. This reference, coupled with the "Anti-Britney, aka rocket queen, and disposable teen" gives a glimpse on her views of a certain segment of popular culture often privileged by mainstream representations of adolescents depicted in television shows and movies such as *Hannah Montana, High School Musical, Camp Rock, and I-Carley.*

This on-line autobiographical snippet is a stark contrast to the picture that would emerge if you were to read Colleen's school records without meeting her. School records paint a picture of a traditional all-American youth as depicted by mainstream media culture: a straight-A student, first chair in the prestigious school marching and jazz bands, regular attendee at her church and confirmation classes, participant in a community soccer club, and summer counselor at a church-related camp.

Although Colleen occasionally wore long, flowing black skirts accompanied by black ruffled tops with corsets over them and completed the outfit with lace-up military boots, a reoccurring theme in many interviews was her desire to be androgynous. Her usual daily garb consisted of the chunky boots, often laced over jeans with rips filled in with assorted fishnet material, T-shirts with logos promoting heavy-metal bands from the

1980's, and spiked necklaces and bracelets along with dangling crystals and pendants. Her nails were often painted black, and her shoulder-length hair was usually highlighted a dark, unnatural henna. The contrast between Colleen's public persona and autobiographical signature and the all-American-girl record in her guidance folder dossier presented seemingly anomalous images of this individual. Colleen's expansion of required literacy competencies through redesign of old literacy skills to incorporate new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for new social contexts (Jenkins et al.) illustrates how the recursive elements of the NLG's multiliteracy pedagogy problematize the flat characterizations of contemporary adolescents in mainstream media texts.

Discussion

Participants in this study demonstrated behaviors aligned with Michel de Certeau's notions about tactics of resistance and how they serve as "guileful ruse" (37). de Certeau sees a guileful ruse as a tactic of the weak, a method used by those who do not hold power in the dominant society. Raven's name, Jen's Druid necklace, and the kanga cloth, for example, allowed the individuals to present themselves and perform in ways that assert their identities and, at times, to create a participatory sub-culture within the borders of the established, and often repressive, dominant culture. The adolescents who took part in this study showed me how commodities originally designed to support the dominant economic and social structure can be used as a way to resist and oppose the principles that culture espouses. Kanga cloth as well as the conscious fashion choices made by Jen and participants in the study expand the notion of text to incorporate selectively chosen textiles and artifacts that present a message through performance.  The

political slogans woven into the kanga cloth afforded women a canvas for presenting an opinion in a society where their verbal expressions were silenced. By finding subtle, yet tactical ways to circumvent school dress codes, youths in this study were able to make identity statements that otherwise would have been allowable only outside the school boundaries. In both cases, the use of textiles as performance texts allowed these groups to form participatory sub-cultures that provided support and mentoring.

Participants in this study used their favorite pop-culture texts to create behaviors, bodily physicality, gestures, and affect that directly challenged traditional views of how a successful student should look in school. Students demonstrated four of the seven aspects of the NLG's concept of gestural design through presentation and performance that fell short of actually violating established social protocol (Cope and Kalantzis). The youths also appeared to intuit and exhibit all major functional grammars or meta-languages that describe and explain patterns of meaning in multiliteracies. In addition to gestural design, they exhibited linguistic design, visual design, audio design, spatial design, and multimodal design (Cope and Kalantzis), which allowed them to expand personal definitions of literacy beyond traditional norms of reading and writing. Design, particularly the aspect of Redesign, challenged traditional notions of what constitutes the successful, well-rounded student and raised the question: Are schools becoming places where an honor student and star soccer player can present herself as an androgynous Goth?

Future Trends

The youths in this study were able to recognize the value of established literacy practices and cultural norms while at the same time they were willing to challenge and

redesign aspects of conventional wisdom, and conventional schooling that struck them as counterproductive. Moje cautions against, "the trend toward romanticizing youth literacy practices in a way that overlooks the social, political, and economic importance-indeed necessity-of developing strong academic literacy skills and practices, particularly those focused on print" (207). Colleen's knowledge and mastery of academic codes and conventions allowed her to negotiate a space for her out-of-school interests within the school day. Lacking this knowledge and proficiency would have negated her ability to redesign established aspects of the school culture to allow space for her texts of choice.

Much has been written by researchers concerning the creation of third spaces, areas where ICT and popular texts intersect with academic literacies, ideally to benefit the goals of both students and teachers (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alverez, and Chiu; Moje; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer et al.). Moje questions whether these third spaces are always "valuable and desirable" (216); however, for the youth in this study the intersection served as both. Having opportunities to share thoughts regarding fashion and popular culture with peers both on-line and in research focus groups and to formulate and explain their thinking through metacognitive reflection our interviews encouraged, provided the youths a scaffold for the Design/Redesign process. Metacognitive reflection and establishing affinity spaces based on political and social ideology regarding kanga choices was not something the women of East Africa had opportunities to do. This presents a question for future research studies on the importance of affinity groups when individuals use tactics of resistance to circumvent established social, political, and economic factions. Future research could also address the personal relevance of a resistant message conveyed via performance if there is no affinity group to support the

message or continue the conversation. When she enters the classroom as a novice teacher, Jen will most likely find herself in a space devoid of her Druid affinity group. If she did wear her jewelry as she announced, Jen would enact a tactic of resistance regarding cultural and religious artifacts typically accepted in a public school setting. However, there is a distinct possibility that no one in the school would read her pentacle earrings and oak wreath necklace as anything other than fashionable adornments, which also raises questions that may need to be addressed in future research on redesign of popular media that individuals to grow in their voices and social identities.

Works Cited

Alvermann, Donna. *Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents.* Executive Summary and

    Paper Commissioned by the National Reading Conference. Chicago: National Reading

    Conference, 2001, Print.

Biersteker, Ann. "Language, Poetry, and Power: A Reconsideration of Utendi wa Mwana

    Kupona." *Faces of Islam in African Literature*. Ed. K.W. Harrow. London: Heinmann.

    1991. 59-77. Print.

Cope, Bill., & Kalantzis, Mary. Multiliteracies*: Literacy learning and the design of social

    futures*. New York: Routledge. 2000. Print.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press,

    1984. Print.

Gee, James Paul. *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling.* New

    York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Gutierrez, K.D., Baquedano-Lopez,  Alvarez, H., & Chiu, M.M. "Building

        Culture of Collaboration through Hybrid Language Practices." *Theory into Practice,*

        38.2 (1999): 87-93. Print.

Jenkins, H. Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robinson, A. J., & Weigel, M. *Confronting the*

    *Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century.* Chicago: The

    MacArthur Foundation, 2006. Print.

    <http://www.projectnml.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf.

Lewis, Cynthia, and Antillana Del Valle. "Literacy and Identity: Implications for Research and

    Practice." *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Resesrch.* Ed.Leila Christenbury, Randy

    Bomer, and Peter Smagorinsky. New York: Guilford Press, 2009. 307-322. Print.

Moje, Elizabeth. "Youth Cultures, Literacies, and Identities In and Out of School." In

        Flood, J., Heath, S.B., & Lapp, D. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching*

        *Literacy through the Communicative Arts.* Ed. Flood, J., Heath, S.B., & Lapp, D.

        Newark, DE: International Reading Association. 2008. 207-219. Print.

Moje, E., Ciechanowski, K., Kramer, K., Ellis, L., Carrillo, R. & Collazo, T.

"Working Toward Third Space in Content Area Literacy: An Examination of Everyday

Funds of Knowledge and Discourse." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39 (2004): 38-70.

Print.

New London Group "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures."

*Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60-92. Print.

Spradley, James *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Wilson. 1980.

Print.

Stake, Robert E. *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

1995. Print.

Wenger, Etienne. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge,

MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.

Contact Information for the Author

Donna Mahar, Assistant Professor of English Education and Literacy

SUNY Empire State College

Donna.Mahar@esc.edu